

The Wife of Abraham Lincoln

Of Whom We Read So Little Today and Know Less

By William Perrine



A Daguerreotype of Robert S. Todd,
Never Before Reproduced

ful Titania, under the spell of the magic potion, kisses the long ears of poor Bottom. Perhaps there has never been an extremely homely man more conscious of his external disadvantage than Mr. Lincoln was of those defects and irregularities in both face and figure that usually deprive men of feminine admiration. Yet there is ample evidence that not only was he easily susceptible in his early manhood to the charms and influence of women, but that he indeed entered titrally, if not gracefully, into more than one courtship.

It has been generally agreed by those who had direct or personal knowledge of Lincoln's early life after he reached the years of manhood, and by those who have investigated and compared the various sources of information about it, that his first experience as a lover presents the evidence of a romance—perhaps the only one that really reached his heart. At the age of twenty-four he was living in the little pioneer town of New Salem, Illinois, on the Sangamon River. It was a rude, primitive settlement, and it was here that he became captain of the local militia, carried on the functions of a postmaster by personally delivering letters to his neighbors from his hat, displayed his prowess with his fists by thrashing the champion bully in that part of Illinois, argued cases before the local Justice of the Peace, and started in politics as a candidate for the Legislature. He was so poor that he scarcely had one suit of clothes; he eked out his livelihood by doing any chores or odd jobs that fell to him among people who were mostly as poor as himself.

The most important among these was the keeper of the village tavern, a frontiersman who had come up from South Carolina and who was known as James Rutledge. He had a daughter, Ann, who has been recalled as an example of grace and beauty, and also, with less hyperbole, as a nice, red-haired schoolgirl; and subsequently Lincoln became a boarder in her father's tavern. But there had been another denizen of New Salem who had courted her, and who, after having been engaged to her, went to New York State in order to return to Illinois with his mother and kinsmen. As he failed to come back her friends told her that she had been deceived, and then Lincoln is represented as hoping that the way had been opened for him.

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IT IS a tradition that they were betrothed after she was convinced that she had been deserted, but that the distress which she had suffered was so grievous as to impair her health and finally to throw her into a brain fever. The illness was fatal; before she died she is said to have called repeatedly for Lincoln, and he was brought to her bedside and left with her alone before she became unconscious. There is no doubt that the effect of her death upon him was harrowing and that indeed it nearly overthrew his mind. The disposition to that aberration of gloom or melancholia which often was noted of him in later years took complete possession of his thoughts. He had to be watched closely lest he might do physical harm to himself in the midst of his great grief. He was unable for several weeks to apply himself to any of his customary tasks, and when at last he had again become himself in mind it was thought not only that his face seemed far older than his years, but indeed that sorrow had set upon it a lifelong mark. A quarter of a century afterward, when he had become famous, he was heard to remark that he "loved the very name of Rutledge."

But whatever may really have been the degree of his attachment to Ann and of the poignancy which he felt over her death, it was not more than a year or two before his heart was again longing for love. Lincoln was far from being a bold lover, and in fact was timorous or strange in his advances to women, as well as somewhat uncertain as to whether he ought or ought not to be married.

The next young woman that attracted his attention was Miss Mary Owen, of Kentucky, who made her appearance

in New Salem in 1836 while on a visit to her sister. Lincoln seems to have won her esteem but not her affections; and indeed his courtship was entirely wanting in ardor. When he wrote her a letter of proposal he had more to say in it about his poverty and his shortcomings than about his love, and he had even expressed some doubt previously as to whether he would make the sort of husband with whom she would be most happy. On this point "Friend Mary," as he called her, apparently had little difficulty in agreeing with him when she declined his offer. "Mr. Lincoln," she said many years afterward, when she had become a matron, "was deficient in those little links which make up the chain of woman's happiness; at least it was so in my case. Not that I believed it proceeded from a lack of goodness of heart, but his training had been different from mine."

But soon after the time when she declined his suit he wrote a letter to a friend in which he congratulated himself on being out of the "scrape," ungallantly expressing the opinion that she was an old maid large enough to be "a fair match for Falstaff," and that she and her sister had wanted to capture him against his will.

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THE next regular courtship ascribed to Lincoln began soon after he was thirty years of age. At that time there had arrived in Springfield a Kentucky girl of twenty-one, who was regarded with much admiration—according to the standards of education and social taste which then prevailed in the little town—as an accomplished belle. She was a daughter of Robert S. Todd; her family included some of the best-known of the pioneers in the Blue Grass State, and she had been educated with some care. People who had seen little of the world outside of Kentucky and Illinois were disposed to view her as an example of aristocratic breeding, and to marvel over her culture as a student of French. At Springfield she made her home with her sister, who was

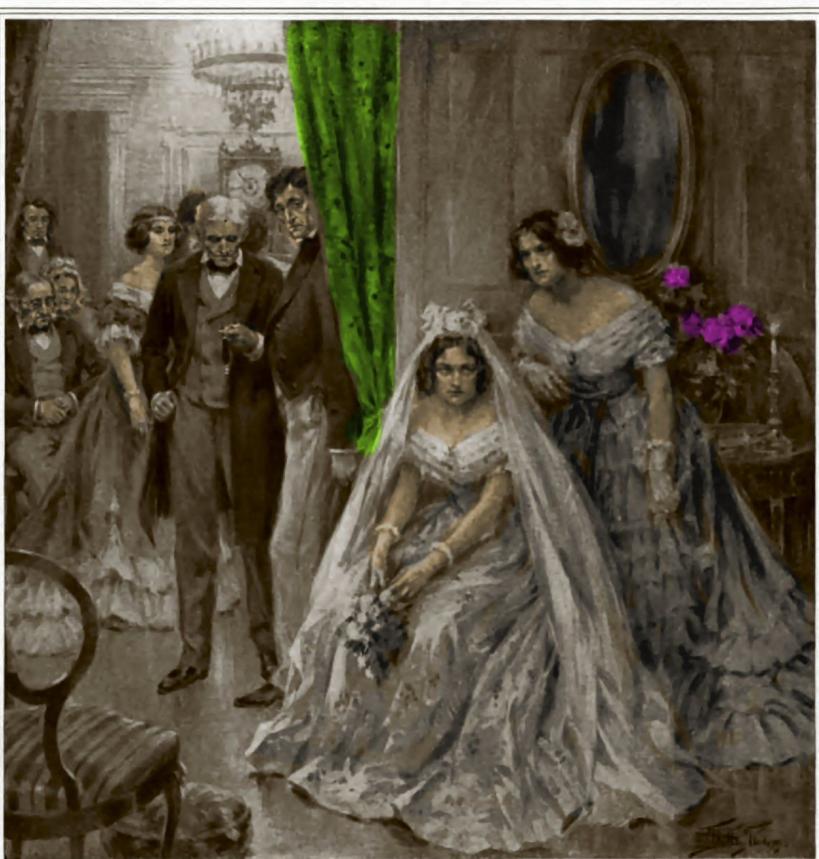


Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, From an Original Negative
Made in 1861

courtship, and which William H. Herndon, who was for many years Lincoln's law partner and afterward the chief biographer of his private life, gave ready credence, is remarkable in some respects. It seems that Lincoln asked Speed one evening to take to Miss Todd a letter in which he informed her that, after great deliberation, he felt that he did not love her sufficiently to warrant her in marrying him; that his friend threw it into the fire, and that he then insisted that it was the duty of Lincoln to go to her personally, tell her that he did not love her, and then, saying as little as possible, leave at the earliest opportunity. The advice was accepted; and several hours afterward the two men again met each other. Lincoln related to him how Mary Todd had burst into tears, wringing her hands as if in agony.

"To tell the truth, Speed," he said, "it was too much for me. I found the tears trickling down my own cheeks. I caught her in my arms and kissed her." Speed told him that he had acted the fool and that his conduct was tantamount to a renewal of the engagement. "Well," drawled Lincoln, "if I am in again so be it. It's done and I shall abide by it."

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DRAWN BY E. D. STEVENS
"The Bridegroom was Absent, and Miss Todd Sat Nervously Tossing With a Bunch of Flowers"

the wife of Ninian W. Edwards, a son of the Governor of the State; and it was not long before both the graces and the imperious temper of Mary Todd gave her a distinctive place in the social life of the town. Lincoln, whose own place in it, so far as his kinsfolk were concerned, was very much inferior to hers, was nevertheless among those who were welcomed to the Edwards household; and his interest in her conversation gradually became deep and earnest.

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MISS TODD'S stature was short, her figure plump, her face round, her manner spirited and her tongue lively. She behaved, it was thought, as if she delighted in being admired, but there was often a touch of arrogance in her deportment and of sarcastic railing in her speech. Her love of display and authority was strong. Long afterward her sister thought that she was the most ambitious woman she had ever known, and recalled how, even in her girlhood, she had said that she was destined to marry a President.

The story which Joshua F. Speed, who was Lincoln's most intimate friend at this time, once told as to the

indicate that his nerves had, for the time being, all gone to pieces. At length he returned to Springfield and took up again the practice of law. But in a short time a lady who was a friend of both Miss Todd and himself succeeded in bringing them together in a spirit of reconciliation; the courtship was renewed, and after only a brief preliminary notice to a few friends they were quietly united in marriage by the Reverend Charles M. Dresser on the fourth of November, 1842, in accordance with the rites of the Episcopal Church. It was said that the bridegroom did not present a happy appearance, and more than a quarter of a century afterward Ward H. Lamon, as well as Herndon recorded some curious stories and bits of gossip as to the morbidity and singularity of his conduct on the evening of the ceremony.

If it is to be believed, as Mrs. Lincoln's sister believed or as she has been credited with having said, that even then Mary had declared that she would marry some one who would become President of the United States, there was little in the circumstances of the new husband's life to betoken that she had made a choice likely to result in gratifying that purpose. Stephen A. Douglas, who had paid marked

attentions to her, gave far more promise of a dashing success that might lead to such a goal. Lincoln was still so poor that he had to adjust his living expenses with severe economy. Thus the couple had no roof-tree of their own to live under. "We are not keeping house," wrote Lincoln several months after the marriage, "but are boarding at the Globe Tavern, which is very well kept now by a widow lady of the name of Beck. Our room and boarding only cost us four dollars a week."

Not long afterward their first son was born, to whom the name of Robert Todd, his mother's father, was given, and who is still living after a conspicuous career as Secretary of War and Minister to England. Mrs. Lincoln was looked upon by some of her husband's friends as being a plucky little woman in caring for his domestic affairs, and sometimes she spoke of him as if she felt much pride in him, despite his extreme homeliness. She would talk of his features and his stature with good-humored admiration, and would insist that he fully deserved to be called "Honest Abe," as he even then was in Springfield. "The people," she said on one occasion, "are perhaps not aware that his heart is as large as his legs are long."

In the Years Before Lincoln Became President

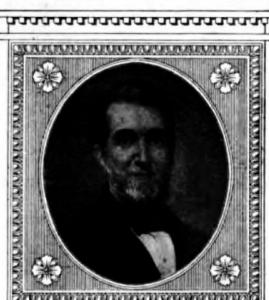
AFTER his marriage he continued to advance not only in his professional life but in political life also. His wife urged him to take a larger part in public affairs, although his own ambition had been set in that direction before he married her. In fact when they first engaged their room at the Globe Tavern, Lincoln was turning over in his mind the question whether he should be a candidate for a seat in the National House of Representatives. Consequently it was greatly to her gratification that within only a little more than four years after their marriage he was elected to Congress, having defeated so conspicuous and popular a candidate as Peter Cartwright, the celebrated leader of Methodism in the West. He served a single term at Washington and did little that attracted more than ordinary notice. At one of the two sessions which he attended he had his wife with him, and while there they were boarders in the same house with the most notable of the Abolition leaders or sympathizers who were then to be found in Congress—Joshua R. Giddings, of Ohio.

In the greater portion of the twelve years which followed, between the retirement of Mr. Lincoln from Congress and his election to the Presidency of the United States, he lived at Springfield, his time for the most part being engrossed in the practice of the law and in Illinois politics. Most of what is known of his domestic life during this period did not begin to be recorded until the years succeeding his death, and it is made up largely of gossip over trifles, as to temper or temperament, or a magnified interpretation of things which would have been totally forgotten had not his posthumous greatness caused everybody who had the slightest "recollection" of any peculiarity on the part of him or his wife to come forward in response to the eager curiosity of millions. For Mrs. Lincoln did not figure at all in the public eye outside of Springfield. The home life of the couple was simple: Mr. Lincoln's habits and tastes were entirely averse to social pretense or ambition, and his wife rejoiced in his advance in public favor. Probably the first that the nation at large knew of her was when the news came to him at Springfield that he had been nominated for the Presidency by the National Republican Convention at Chicago, and when, leaving his friends and carrying with him the dispatch, he quietly said that there was a little woman down at his house who would want to hear of it.

Mrs. Lincoln's Advent in the White House

LESS than a year afterward Mrs. Lincoln entered the White House, unknown personally to all the men and women who were active in the social life of the National Capital. She was considered somewhat unfortunate in being placed there as the immediate successor of Miss Harriet Lane, President Buchanan's niece, whose fine grace and tact had been warmly admired and acknowledged by even the enemies of her uncle. It was now well known throughout the country, from what had been learned of the new President's domestic life, that he had no interest whatever in the doings of society, and consequently there was much curiosity as to his wife's manners, the extent of her influence over him, and her fitness to sustain a comparison with Miss Lane as a social administrator in the White House. But many of the women from the South who had long maintained in Washington an aristocratic system were preparing to go to their homes, uncertain whether they would ever return; most of them who did not sneer at the advent of Mrs. Lincoln treated it with an ironical smile, or with condescending pleasantness, and there were numerous expressions of disgust over the prospect of a complete downfall of the old régime. Moreover, among the women who came to the front with the change in the Administration there were few who were qualified by experience to take the places of the accomplished dames and belles that had surrounded Miss Lane. In the midst of the unrest and rancor which filled the atmosphere of the Capital it was a time when the wife of the President peculiarly needed every advantage that sympathy could give her. She not only had to face a situation which would have tried the temper and taxed the resources of a more serene and far more capable woman, but she also had to bear all the prejudices which her husband's plain speech and awkward manners had excited against her among people of fashion.

Mrs. Lincoln was found to be unprepared for the tasks of her new situation as regarded her knowledge of the peculiarities of the social situation, and she had some difficulty in making real friends. Her perplexities, coupled with some resentments, led her into blunders or placed her under the influence of persons whose advice was not judicious. She thoughtlessly bestowed marked attention on several ladies whose husbands were not in political sympathy with Mr. Lincoln, and showed a want of clever discrimination in her treatment of the wives or the daughters of public men who were. Several days after her



Mr. and Mrs.
N. W. Edwards, the
Brother-in-Law
and the Sister
of Mrs. Lincoln

PHOTOGRAPHED FROM PAINTINGS
IN THE LINCOLN HOME AT
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS,
BY COURTESY OF A. S. EDWARDS



entrance into the White House, at the first reception there under the new Administration, she enjoyed with intense and eager animation not only the splendor of the scene, but also the compliments which were showered upon her by the multitude of statesmen, officers and diplomats who were curious to see her on a social occasion. The East Room was crowded; for two hours and a half the new President was obliged continuously to shake hands, and Mrs. Lincoln, standing next to him on his right, with flowers in her hair and attired in a magenta brocade with diamonds, was evidently solicitous of making a favorable impression. By one friendly eyewitness it was said that she was "always amiable and dignified," by another observer that she was "a handsome, matronly lady," and by still another that she was "frank and lively."

Mr. Lincoln himself, often good-naturedly thrusting out one hand to a gentleman and the other to a lady at the same time, was viewed with much wonder because of his height, his strangely-rugged face, his awkward manners and his ill-fitting clothes. But it seems to have been generally agreed that his wife gave no signs of being shy or timid, and that she was not likely to be embarrassed at any time for want of readiness in speech, although in the opinion of the judicious her manner was too quick or restless and her laugh too frequent.

Shadows of the Civil War Fall Upon Her

MRS. LINCOLN'S enjoyment of such scenes did not last very long. Public enemies of her husband sometimes included her in their threats and objurgations. For example, some wretches sent her a crude painting which represented her husband with his feet chained, his body tarred and feathered and his neck encircled with a noose. The problems of the war, which soon engrossed his attention during most of the hours of every day and night, deprived her largely of his society. Ambitious or worldly women began to pass criticisms on her conduct and her companions. The young Miss Kate Chase, afterward Mrs. Sprague, with her superb aspirations, looked forward to the day when her widower father, the Secretary of the Treasury, might succeed Mr. Lincoln and when she herself would take the place of Mrs. Lincoln; the two women could not get along together in the performance of White House functions, and from that time the troubles of Mrs. Lincoln began to increase. Probably no other woman who has lived for four years in the White House had more of them and also fewer friends. The "court" which she had fondly dreamed of reigning over proved to be a bitter disappointment; she became something unpopular, and in the midst of her tribulations death robbed her of her second son—the boy Willie, whose name her husband could scarcely mention afterward lest he should break down in his great grief.

It was charged by people who did not like Mrs. Lincoln that she was too prone to seek consolation and comfort from spiritualists, particularly after the loss of her son; that she gave too much encouragement to the visits of actresses, estimable as these ladies were; that she conducted parsimoniously the receptions which were substituted for the State dinners which the Lincolns abandoned; that she did not sufficiently weigh her words in conversation about public men, as, for instance, when she spoke of the Secretary of State as "that Abolition sneak, Seward," and that she did not fully sympathize with her husband in his anti-slavery sentiments and policy. Two of her sisters and their husbands were among the Confederates, and this fact had an effect in raising some prejudice against her among highly-zealous supporters of the Union.

In most of the last two years of Mr. Lincoln's term there was little or no active social life in the White House. Long after the death of Willie Lincoln it continued to be regarded as a place of private mourning. Indeed by many persons in the North it had been felt that at a time when the very existence of the Government was at stake, and when every battle was darkening thousands of homes with sorrow, it was not only improper but also wrong that there should be dancing, feasting or other diversions in the White House. Thus bitter criticisms had been passed upon both the President and Mrs. Lincoln by religious men and women in the North for an elaborate entertainment and reception which was given in the winter of 1862, although largely at the instance of Secretary



The House in Springfield, Illinois, Where Mrs. Lincoln was Married, and Where She Died

Seward as a stroke of social politics. It was held by those who condemned it to be selfish and unpatriotic in view of the hardships and sufferings which Union soldiers were undergoing in camps and hospitals, and Mrs. Lincoln was publicly satirized in verses that bore the title, "The Queen Must Dance." But the fact was that she could not escape criticism whatever course she took. When she gave receptions she was chided on the one side for thoughtless vanity or levity, and on the other—when she gave none at all—for narrowness or tactlessness. The President had little time or thought for such questions, and he was seldom known publicly to express an opinion on them. If he referred to them a half-sad, half-jocular smile was said to have spread over his face, as if he felt how foolish it was for people to give the slightest concern to them in the midst of the cares and toils of the great struggle for their National existence.

It was the last days of Abraham Lincoln that were among his happiest. The end of the war was at hand, and he had begun to look forward to a time of cheer and rest. Much of his thought was taken up with the part which he would soon be called upon to play in the pacification of his countrymen. On the eve of the fall of Richmond he had been at City Point with Mrs. Lincoln; when they journeyed back to Washington in a steamboat, and when the Capitol came into view she said to him, "That city is filled with our enemies."

But instantly and somewhat impatiently he checked her. "Enemies! We must never speak of that."

The Supreme Woe of Mrs. Lincoln's Life

A FEW days afterward, on the afternoon of Good Friday, Mr. Lincoln was observed to be in fine spirits. He invited General Grant and his wife to go with him to the theatre that evening; he believed that the worst of the great strain, which had long worn his mind daily and nightly, was now a thing of the past, and when he went with Mrs. Lincoln on drive he chatted with her, in an unusually animated mood, of the past and the future. "I have seen you thus," she said, "only once before; it was just before our dear Willie died."

Afterward she recalled some of the things which he told her in that hour of gladness. "Mary," he said, "we have had a hard time of it since we came to Washington; but the war is over, and with God's blessing we may hope for four years of peace and happiness, and then we will go back to Illinois and pass the rest of our lives in quiet. We have laid by some money, and during this term we will try to save up more, but shall not have enough to support us. We will go back to Illinois, and I will open a law office at Springfield or Chicago, and practice law, and do enough to give us a livelihood." Five hours afterward the bullet of the assassin was fired into his brain.

Mrs. Lincoln was shocked by the death of her husband such a degree that she seemed to be helpless for weeks afterward. It was difficult to persuade her that it was her duty to leave the White House. Indeed, President Johnson and his family, it was said, could not move into it at the time when they had expected it to be ready for their occupation, and it was a month after Mr. Lincoln's body had been carried away that she left the mansion. Johnson had sent word to her, however, that she might remain there as long as would be agreeable to her and disclaimed any intention of hastening her departure. From all over the North there came to her innumerable messages of sorrow and consolation; she was exhorted by pulpit and press to bear up under her great woe and to realize that the heart of the nation was with her; and rich men promptly volunteered to raise a fund of a hundred thousand dollars for her support. President Lincoln's friends estimated that when he first went into the White House he was worth about seven thousand dollars; he had been obliged to borrow money in anticipation of his first quarter's salary, but as his habits had been simple it was supposed that when he died he had saved half or more of the annual salary, which was then twenty-five thousand dollars. The widow soon informed her friends as to her fears that she would not have enough to live on, and Congress in its first session after the assassination granted her Mr. Lincoln's pay for a full year.

From time to time, however, there were reports of her conduct and utterances which the public noted with peculiar concern. She declared that Mr. Lincoln was "the best man who ever lived on earth," that she "idealized" him, and that her grief had been so uncontrollable that she had been obliged to bury herself in solitude.

"In my great sorrow," she wrote to one of her correspondents at about this time, "how often have I prayed for death to end my misery!"

But her prevailing mood, as the country saw it, tended toward querulous and reproachful lamentation. She thought that she had not been properly treated; she formed plans which seemed to be undignified for increasing her income, and she could not understand why the many public men who were so solicitous as to the memory of her husband should not be more concerned about her own welfare. "True friends, in these overwhelming days of affliction," she wrote, "I find to be very rare."

How She Yielded to Injudicious Counsel

IN THE autumn of 1867 Mrs. Lincoln was induced to put on exhibition and for sale in New York a variety of habiliments and trinkets. These were advertised, and the public was invited to inspect them, as a collection of things that had been associated with her life in the White House. The sale, which took place in a Broadway showroom, was bitterly criticized. Save some lace, shawls and jewels most of the articles were old or commonplace and were compared by visitors to a display in a cheap pawnshop. The high prices which were put upon them were absurdly disproportionate to the intrinsic value, but it was represented that Mrs. Lincoln was in need of the money and that they had a historic and patriotic interest to the public. The effect of these transactions on the public mind, however, was exceedingly painful.

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The Wife of Abraham Lincoln

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Thurlow Weed, on behalf of those Republicans whose parsimony in Congress, it was charged by some of their opponents, had forced Mrs. Lincoln to make the sale, wrote with a vehemence which was unusual to his cautious pen and which, it is believed, he afterward regretted. He declared that proper arrangements would have been made for her maintenance if she "had so deported herself as to command respect," and even intimated that the things which were sold were illicit gifts from Government contractors. He gave emphasis, too, to a charge which was long talked of among the people everywhere the sale of some of Mr. Lincoln's raiment.

Charles Sumner as Her Champion

BUT there were not wanting stout defenders of her acts. Men who felt that her errors of judgment and speech were exaggerated, or that, in any event, they should be condoned or forgotten in loyalty to the memory of her great husband, strongly rebuked her critics. This sentiment was heard and felt on the other side of the Atlantic, and was echoed back in stirring tones of rebuke.

The "London Telegraph," in condemning what it called the slanders to which she had been subjected, said:

"Mrs. Lincoln is entitled to more than respect from the American people. They owe to her reverence for her very name's sake. If fifty thousand swords were to have leaped from their scabbards to avenge the slightest insult offered to Marie Antoinette, a million of American hands and hearts should be quick to relieve the wants of the widow of the Emancipator; and if this deplorable tale of her wants could be true, which we decline to believe, the American public wants no stimulus from abroad to take such an incident at once from the evil atmosphere of electioneering and to deal with the necessities of Abraham Lincoln's family in a manner befitting the National dignity."

But this, Congress was slow and reluctant to do. Mrs. Lincoln had gone to Europe and in 1869 was living in Frankfort-on-the-Main. Charles Sumner heard that she was in need, and he at once resolved that as a United States Senator he would address himself persistently to the task of softening the hearts of his colleagues in her favor. A bill was introduced which provided that there should be paid to her by the National Government a pension of five thousand dollars a year. Most of the Senators received the proposition coldly or indifferently. In the first session of the next Congress it was again laid before them, but for more than a year all attempts to bring it to a vote were futile. Finally a bill which granted three thousand dollars a year went to the Senate from the House, but the Committee on Pensions unanimously agreed that it should be reported adversely.

Sumner, however, would not consent to abide by the action of the Committee. Time and again he demanded that the question should be submitted directly to the Senate. At length he overcame the dilatory tactics for quietly smothering it, but the majority was only eight. Mrs. Lincoln, who was then living in London, wrote to him, when she heard the news, that words would be inadequate to express her thanks for all the goodness he had shown her.

The Last Days of Her Clouded Life

BUT after her return from Europe Mrs. Lincoln manifested strongly those symptoms of mental disturbance that had been noted in her conduct for some time previously. She bemoaned the extravagance of the times, chided every one who wore jewelry in her presence, and shut herself in the room which she occupied in the Springfield house of her sister, Mrs. Edwards. She would complain that she was very ill, would

inform visitors that they might expect to see her dead the next day, and would then astonish them with the size of her meals. She fancied that gas was a mysterious creation of the devil, and would use only the plainest tallow candles for lighting her room. "I'm on fire, burning up; just feel of me!" she would exclaim, even when her temperature was normal. One of her fears was that knives were hacking her to pieces. "Just feel that gash in my shoulder," she would say despairingly. "I don't think I can stand such wounding long." Her once full figure began to dwindle away; her face became very thin, and she would so darken her room in daytime that every ray of light was excluded from the windows while she waited, she said, for the angel of death.

At last she became very sad and very gentle. Around her wandering mind there seemed to gather the shadows of a softly-sombre twilight. But she could no longer control her movements, and there was fear that she could not safely be left alone. It was necessary to take her into court, and there it was agreed by all who were concerned that there should be guardianship of her person and her interests; and, unmurmuringly, she was led away, amidst the tears of the spectators, to an asylum. At her death, on the sixteenth of July, 1882, she was sixty-three years of age. Long before that time the harsh judgments that had been often passed upon her by some of her countrymen were softened and recalled. It began to be seen that there would have been only kind and generous thought for her, years before, had her impaired reason and its causes been generally known; and when it was learned that she had been laid away by the side of her great husband, under the stately monument at Springfield, there was many a prayer throughout the nation that peace might be hers and that their souls might be reunited in the bliss of eternal rest.